



His Wicked Reputation: Wicked Trilogy

By Madeline Hunter

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Editorial Review

Review

“Hunter...spins the intrigues of an enterprising bastard son and a resourceful artist to delightful effect...romance and suspense are balanced perfectly.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“With her usual aplomb, Hunter seamlessly marries seductive wit with smoldering sensuality in her latest impeccably written Regency romance.”—*Booklist*

Praise for Madeline Hunter and Her Novels

“Smooth, sexy, and sophisticated.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Hunter...masterfully weaves a sensual web.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“There are some writers who are born to write...Stellar.”—*Examiner.com*

“Hunter combines desire with mystery and sensuality with adventure, bringing readers the kind of romance that makes their hearts soar.”—*RT Book Reviews*

About the Author

Madeline Hunter is a two-time RITA award winner and seven-time finalist, and has more than twenty-five nationally bestselling historical romances in print. A member of RWA's Honor Roll, her books have been on the bestseller lists of the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Publishers Weekly*. More than six million copies of her books are in print and her novels have been translated into thirteen languages. She has a PhD in art history, which she teaches at the university level.

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CHAPTER 1

It was well past noon when the maid delivered the breakfast tray to Hendrika's opulent bedroom. Gareth Fitzallen finished reading the final drafts of a complicated business contract while the servant threw back the curtains and opened the window.

Hendrika purred, stretched, and rubbed her eyes. Gareth collected the vellum sheets he had spread over her body, the better to keep them organized. The maid plumped up an assortment of pillows. Hendrika sat up and rested her back against them, exposing her lush, naked body to the maid, to Gareth, and possibly to the family who owned the tall, narrow house across the canal.

“Do you require anything else?” the maid asked. Her downcast eyes still allowed a gaze that rested on Gareth's bare chest. She glanced up into his eyes for a second through her lashes. Her nostrils flared. The maid was becoming a problem. He did nothing to encourage her, but inevitably Hendrika would see one of the sly smiles or hot looks sent his way.

Hendrika shooed the woman away, then poured coffee into the two cups. “What are all these documents?”

“The shipment to England from Honfleur. We have finalized the terms of the sale. The count’s factor and I need only sign. And you, too, of course.”

Although fair like many of the residents of Amsterdam, Hendrika’s eyes could grow very dark when she became thoughtful. They turned black now. “You are sure your brother the duke will guarantee your payment? Elbert would turn over in his grave if he knew I took this cargo from one foreign port to another on credit alone.”

He set down his coffee on the tray, gently brushed a long lock of her curly blond hair aside, and bent to plant a distracting kiss on the full globe of her breast. “Of all that we have shared this last month, I suspect your late husband would find our partnership in this shipment the least of it.”

Strong fingers stretched through his hair, then held his head in place, encouraging him to distress Elbert’s ghost all the more. She squirmed, almost upsetting the tray, and giggled in the guttural way she had. Then she pushed him away and returned to her breakfast, her breasts now heavy and hard and their tips protuberant. She buttered some bread. “Which jam do you want?”

“Cherry.”

Two newspapers had come up with the tray. She took the Dutch one and gave him the one out of Paris. He munched his bread while reading the French political news.

Suddenly a grip closed on his arm. Hendrika exclaimed something in Dutch.

“Gareth, my love,” she whispered after taking a deep breath. “Look at this here. Can you read it? Should I translate?”

He took the paper. She stroked his arm while he read the short notice she indicated. Five words in he barely noticed her there.

“*Zeus*.” His own breath caught and held before he exhaled.

His half brother Percival, the fourth Duke of Aylesbury, was dead. He had died more than a week earlier. Suddenly. Abruptly. Unexpectedly.

“This is shocking. He was not a sickly man. Far from it. Young still, too. Only thirty-three.”

“What is meant, the inquiry is open?” she asked softly.

“It is just a formality. I must go back, of course. Immediately. I need to help the others, and—”

“Of course. Of course,” she cooed sympathetically.

He turned the paper’s sheets until he found the schedule of packets from Amsterdam to London. Cutlery and china clinked while Hendrika returned to her meal. He set the paper aside on top of the stack of vellum.

“We will need to sign these contracts today, now.” He gestured to them. “I will send a message to the lawyers and arrange a meeting.”

She examined her bread while she slathered jam on it. “With your brother dead, is that wise? His name

swayed the count to extend credit to you. It swayed me too. That and other things.”

He stretched out beside her and helped himself to a bite from her bread. “There is now another half brother who is the duke, one who loves me even more. God forbid he drops dead as well; there is yet another in line. We never run out of them. Nothing has changed.” He gave her a reassuring kiss.

She made the kiss a long one, then looked into his eyes. “But you will leave now, and I do not think you will be back. So I must ensure I am paid one way or another.”

She dipped her short, blunt knife into one of the little blue and white pots, then smeared the garnet jam around her breast. “Cherry, I think you said you prefer this morning.” She took the pot in one hand, and the knife in the other, and gestured for him to remove the tray. Carefully, slowly, she drew circles of jam around her other breast, dabbed two large globs on her nipples, then painted streaks down her body.

“Here, too, I think.” She spread her plump thighs, and painted lower yet. “Oh, yes, and here. You must be your wicked best this morning, so I do not worry about your credit today.”

He let her finish as she wanted. Then he braced himself above her and began licking the jam, so she would think about nothing at all for a very long time.

CHAPTER 2

Eva hitched her clumsy bundle higher under her arm. A snapping breeze threatened to unveil the object shrouded in old burlap. She stopped to tuck the coarse fabric closer all around the heavily sculpted plaster frame. When she had chosen this painting, she had failed to consider how hard it would be to hide and carry it.

While she fussed with her burden, she kept one eye on a figure moving on the road. Another stranger. With nearby Birmingham’s growth, and with all the people displaced by the failed harvests, strangers moving through the countryside hardly merited note. Yet this one raised a tiny alarm, for reasons she could not name. Maybe he moved too slowly for a man with someplace to go. In fact, it looked as if he had actually slowed so he would not pass the house’s drive before she reached its end.

This was not the first time she found herself wondering about a stranger. Last week there had been another one, this time in town. Only she was sure she also saw him later, on the lane near her house.

She scolded herself for inventing ghosts. Her current mission made her nervous, that was all. She should not have this painting, and guilt made her overcautious.

She walked on. She glanced back at the house she had just left as she approached the point where its drive met the road. Years ago, before half the trees lining this private lane died, most likely one could not see much besides chimneys from this spot. Now the derelict condition of the building was visible to all. More a large hunting lodge than a proper manor house, it consisted of stone wings attached to a rustic Tudor core. Thirty years ago it might have been considered haphazard in design. Now the tastemakers would think it charming.

Each time she visited, more damage could be seen. Today a whole section of garden wall had vanished, its stones no doubt pilfered to build some outbuilding on one of the nicer properties of Langdon’s End. She expected to round the bend in the road one day and discover nothing more than a heap of rock.

She turned onto the road, fussing with the stupid frame, trying not to keep looking back at the man now walking behind her. Suddenly she heard something that froze her fingers. A horse approached. From the sound of its hooves, it was galloping toward her and nearing the bend in the road ahead that would bring her into view.

She quickly examined her burden to make sure nothing showed, then walked forward with long strides, hoping she appeared to be a woman going about her day's perfectly honest, completely legal, not the least untoward business. In seconds a huge black horse, its head strained against its reins and its teeth bared like a stallion out of hell, bore down on her. Hooves clamoring, breath snorting, that devil head grew larger fast.

It passed that point where its rider should have slowed upon seeing someone on the road. It just kept coming. Alarmed, she jumped aside to make way, damning the rogue who had carelessly risked her life to his whim. At that the horse reared up. Its front hooves pawed the air, and the beast let out a long, furious whinny.

Cool moisture gathered around her feet and ankles. She looked down to see she had stepped right into a deep puddle. She cursed again. Her shoes would probably be ruined.

"My sincere apologies." The voice came from on high while she lifted one foot to determine the damage. Soaked. Ruined for sure.

"It is a little late for courtesy," she snapped. She concentrated on placing her feet in such a way as to exit the puddle without stepping in it yet again. The burden she carried did not make it any easier. She could barely see over it. Perhaps if she lifted it above her head . . .

"The house distracted me. I know coming upon you so fast was inexcusable, but it appeared no one was about."

"If you had been watching the road, you would know it appeared no such way." She looked behind her to point to the other person on the road. Only he was gone. Perhaps he took a shortcut through the woods.

Her skirt proved too narrow for the long strides she needed. She had no choice except to slosh through the puddle to its edge.

A hand jutted in front of her face, grabbing for the painting. "Allow me to relieve you of this so you do not drop it."

She smacked the hand away and made her way to dry grass.

The horse panted and quivered, probably deciding whether to take a bite out of her. She looked up its considerable flank and the long legs and handsome boots that gripped it. She looked higher, up the dashing garnet riding coat to the casually tied cravat. Finally her gaze rose to the face of the man who had addressed her.

Her fury momentarily left her. It lasted no longer than a three-count, she was sure, but in that tiny pause, not only her anger ceased. Her breath did, too, and the movement of the leaves in the breeze, and perhaps even the revolution of the earth.

The rider was beautiful. No other word would do. Handsome would be too vague a description. Attractive would be inadequate. Thick black hair, dark eyes, and eyebrows that arched perfectly, all graced features both regular and precise. The only flaw, a rather wide mouth, could hardly be called a disadvantage, seeing as how it gave the man both expressive possibilities and an undeniable sensual quality.

Then again, he did not need the mouth for that. His air and manner, the very way he sat on that horse, announced he would be nothing but trouble for a woman. Of course, most women would find him too delicious to resist. She suspected he knew that. How could he not when fools like she stared gape-mouthed upon seeing him?

Those dark eyes scrutinized her as surely as she did him, only with much more amusement than she experienced in her own study. He had probably noticed that three count. She doubted he found it a novel reaction to himself.

"I have ruined your shoes. I insist that I pay for another pair."

It had been his fault and he should pay, but she reacted badly to the offer. She resented that he noticed she could ill afford the loss of the shoes. She hated that he sought to subject her to his charity.

"The only payment I ask is that you not gallop that horse on this road while you are admiring architecture. You are too easily impressed by the latter, if that house distracted you."

He turned to look at the house. "I think it handsome."

She rearranged her bundle in her arms. "On the outside, perhaps it would appeal to those who favor sentimentality over sophistication. Inside it is derelict, however. No one has lived there in my memory, and its owner does not maintain it. It is a haven for vagrants and thieves, and the people of the local town would be glad if it burned down. Perhaps one day it will." She hoped not. That house had been very useful to her the last five years.

Hitching up her painting again, she began walking down the road. She heard the horse move. Then she felt its breath on her shoulder. She started, and almost jumped aside again.

"Won't you allow me to help you carry that? Or better yet, give you a ride to where you are going? It looks to be a heavy package, and those shoes must be uncomfortable now."

She looked back over her shoulder, up at the stunning face now marked by a winning smile. No, that mouth was no flaw. Masculine and firm, it turned him from merely beautiful to seductive. He gazed down at her warmly. Perhaps a little too warmly. That should have alarmed her anew. Instead little flutters beat inside her. It was all she could do not to blush and mew.

"No, thank you. I will manage."

"You do not have to be afraid. I promise to behave myself. I am utterly harmless."

His expression, most amused by his own words, put the lie to his reassurance. *Come with me and I will show you the most wicked delights*, those teasing eyes promised.

"I am not afraid of you, sir. Your horse, however, terrifies me. Could you keep back a bit more?"

He held back, but still followed. "Are you going to the town? It is some distance. At least a mile."

"I would not accept a ride with you, even if I had five miles to walk. Please, be on your way, and I will be on mine."

A nod of acquiescence. He turned the black beast, trotted down the lane, then halfway up the drive to the house. He then sat there looking at it. He had given up the game because something interested him more than

dallying with her.

Eva looked back one more time before the bend in the road took the rider out of her view. He appeared magnificent, with the breeze blowing back his hair so his fine profile cut the sky, his gaze absorbed and pensive. If she were a good artist and not just a middling copyist, she would feature him in a grand composition full of dashing action. Instead, she painted his image on her memory.

Her ruined shoes did not bother her on the half mile to her family home. Nor did the clumsy weight of the painting. She smiled all the way. How bad can a poor spinster's day be when the most beautiful man she had ever seen in her life flirts with her?

* * *

How like Percy to let the property go to ruin. Percy had known he would never win in Chancery, so while his lawyers kept the case languishing in court, he had simply let time devalue the object of the contest.

Gareth rode out his frustration, galloping hard. By the time he handed the stallion over to a groom at an inn, the worst of his anger was gone.

The next day he rode into Coventry much recovered. He had a lot of practice at swallowing disappointment, and had learned early that if he allowed Percy to ruin his mood for days on end, he handed Percy a victory.

Besides, Percy was dead. That thought alone made the day sunnier.

He dismounted in front of an elegant house of more than average size. No ruin this, but then Percy had never been able to touch what their father had given to Mrs. Johnson. Gareth hoped that Percy's last thought had been one of fury over how neatly Father had worked that out.

Mrs. Johnson received him in her delicate drawing room. He strode over, bent, and kissed her. Her arm encircled his shoulders so the kiss became an embrace.

"It is so good to see you, Gareth. I assume you have heard the news."

He settled into a chair. "I returned as soon as I read about it, Mother. Terrible news. Just terrible."

His mother maintained a sober face, but her eyes sparkled at his ironic tone. "Yes, terrible. He was still so young. Why, what, thirty-three? So sudden and unexpected too."

"A tragedy."

"Have you been back to Merrywood yet?"

"I thought I would see you first. I will head there in the morning."

She reached over and patted his arm affectionately. He rarely had to explain much to his mother. They were of like minds, just as surely as they were of like visage. His eyes, his nose, even his mouth came from her. Had Allen Hemingford, the third Duke of Aylesbury, been less sure of her he might have suspected Gareth was not his bastard at all. Instead, he had accepted his mistress's claim, and fulfilled his contract to her.

That contract, worked out when she was eighteen, had not only provided this house, a carriage, servants, and an income for life. Being shrewd, she had also insisted her children by the duke be provided for, and be allowed to have the surname Fitzallen in the ancient way—bastard of Allen. Percy had never been able to

interfere with the income Gareth received, either. The house near Langdon's End was a different matter. Aylesbury had left that to him in a codicil to his will. Percy had contested the legacy before his father was cold.

Not that the income came close to his mother's. On it, he could live as a gentleman bachelor with a decent degree of fashion. As it was, however, almost all of it went to the lawyers pleading his case in Chancery.

So he had found ways to augment it. Fortunately, he inherited his mother's shrewdness, and doing so had not been too difficult after finishing the education also provided in that contract. An eye for art had helped.

Other gentlemen might not invite him to their parties and would never introduce their sisters and daughters to him, but his blood meant they might trust him to find a buyer when they had a collection to sell. With the economy in shambles these days, a great deal of art was changing hands. It was the sort of occupation that did not reek of trade, since he did it all as a favor for everyone involved.

"You just returned, you said." Mrs. Johnson spoke while she served the coffee one of her servants had brought. She was entitled to four of them. There had been a Mr. Johnson for a short while. Perhaps as long as a week, Gareth guessed, before the man took the healthy payment made to him and sailed to America.

When the duke had met Amanda Albany, she was unmarried. An innocent. What the duke wanted was not done with unmarried girls. So he arranged a marriage for her, with an army captain by the name of Johnson. Only it was not Johnson's nuptial bed to which young Amanda Albany had gone that wedding night.

"I disembarked less than a week ago. Why? Does it matter?"

"It may. I have been in correspondence with old Stuart. You remember, the footman with the limp. He and I have remained friends since Allan died. He says there is some question about Percival's death. The coroner has left the entire matter open, and investigations are being made by the magistrate."

"Has anyone laid down information that would imply something untoward happened?"

"No, but eyebrows are up. A sudden digestive infirmity with extreme pain and quick death—well, my eyebrows would be up too."

Hence the notice in the paper in Amsterdam, that inquiries were under way. "You worried that they would look to me, didn't you?"

"The enmity between the two of you has been long, and the business over that legacy might encourage them to wonder."

"Have no fear. I was out of the country. I can prove it."

Her expression lightened. She suddenly looked younger than her forty-eight years. Also intelligent and formidable. She would have made the duke a splendid duchess had he not already married Percy's mother, and had Amanda Albany not been a butler's daughter.

Her change in mood implied she had worried a bit about his doings recently. It is a hell of a thing when your own mother thinks you capable of murder. Then again, given the right circumstances, she probably was also.

"I expect Lancelot and Ives will be at Merrywood," she said. "What with the title's transition to Lance and the settling of the estate."

"I hope so. I want to see them." Since Lance now became duke, presumably he would be involved in the inquiries. Ives would take a hand in the estate settling, being a lawyer.

He did not lie in saying he wanted to see his half brothers. Unlike the relationship he had with Percy, Gareth had gotten on well enough with them over the years. And, of course, Lance would now decide about that case in Chancery.

"There is to be a reinterment next week," his mother said. "A mausoleum was quickly built, to Percival's deathbed orders. Now that it is ready, they are digging him up to put him in it. It is a monstrosity, according to Mr. Stuart. I have a drawing here somewhere. I shall find it, so you can prepare yourself. It is so hideous that one wonders if he was determined to be remembered for something, even if it was being the duke who was buried in the ugliest pile in the family graveyard."

"He never had any taste. Father always said so, which drove him mad." He spoke absently, his mind on other things. If magistrates were sniffing around a duke's death, the new duke was not likely to turn his mind to minor matters, like a small property tied up in the courts. Damnation, even in death Percy was going to be an ass.

"I rode up near Langdon's End," he said, "before coming here."

His mother's expression of forbearance chastised him. She thought he should let it go. The daughter of a butler and the mistress of a duke, she did not have a sense of property, even if she had a life interest in this house.

"He has let it go to ruin. There is no caretaker. It is derelict and turning into a shell. I doubt any furniture remains worth using. I was told thieves have been busy."

"Did you enter it?"

"I am forbidden to, remember? I walked around the outside, however, and looked in a few windows. He knew contesting the will would not hold, so he made sure when I finally got it, the house would be almost worthless."

"Perhaps fate has intervened before that happened. Lance has no reason to continue the fight."

"Perhaps." He stood. "If you don't mind, I will go above. I have been on the road too many days."

He took his leave, but her voice stopped him at the door.

"Lady Chester wrote to me. Her niece still sighs over you, and wonders when you will return to London."

Lady Chester's niece was an attractive woman in an unhappy marriage to a boorish viscount. "When I do, I will call on her, but she will be disappointed if she expects anything more."

"You love and leave too quickly, Gareth. No wonder your reputation is not the best."

"I would have stayed longer in the lady's bed if she had not started to try to buy me. A man does not allow his lover to keep him if he has any pride. I did us both a favor in ending it."

"You were not so particular with Lady Dalmouth."

"I was much younger then, and Lady Dalmouth had much to recommend her besides her gifts." Most

notably, Lady Dalmouth possessed sexual experience such as few men are honored to enjoy. Randy, resentful, and ready to take on the world, he had been a willing student, and had barely noticed how he had become the lady's whore until the morning she ordered him to change his coat because she did not favor its color that day.

"Women are kept all the time. I managed to hold on to my pride well enough. I do not see why it should be any different for men if two people share affection."

He had hurt her. He had not meant to, but one hour in his mother's presence and he was fifteen again, and she was trying to plan his life.

"You were not merely the duke's kept woman. You were his true wife and the law be damned. Write to Lady Chester and tell her that I am enthralled with a widow in Amsterdam, so her niece does not expect me to dance attendance if I go up to town."

CHAPTER 3

"They look dry to me," Rebecca said. She gingerly tapped the surface of the painting with her fingertips, then peered to see if any paint had come off on them.

"That one needs another week," Eva muttered, her attention mostly on the painting she had carried home three days earlier, at the cost of a pair of shoes.

"The others don't."

"I cannot go to Birmingham every time a painting is ready. We can ill afford that. I will wait until all of those are dry, then transport them all at once."

Rebecca sighed loudly and threw herself on the divan. Eva felt bad for her sister. Compared to the excitements in Birmingham, their home on the outskirts of Langdon's End and the town of Langdon's End itself held little of interest. The place where one was born and raised never did if one had an adventurous spirit. Rebecca itched for novelties, travel, and the worlds her reading revealed to her.

For a year now, Rebecca had been petitioning to go to London. Eva appeased her by letting her go along on the periodic visits to Birmingham when Eva took her paintings to Mr. Stevenson, a stationer who put them in his window for sale.

Her sister lounged on the divan, one of the few substantial pieces of furniture that had not been sold. She pouted prettily, but then all of Rebecca's expressions looked adorable. Her hair poured down her shoulders, making a thick stream of shiny curls so luxurious no one would notice that the dress she wore had been mended in four places.

Eva envied Rebecca sometimes, which was not fair. Rebecca could not help being beautiful. Only it felt unjust that Rebecca had gotten the better version of everything they had in common. Rebecca's blue eyes possessed the color and depth of a clear, perfect sea, while Eva's could only be called really blue on the sunniest days. The looking glass reflected back some nondescript color too pale to be notable, no matter what it might be. And Rebecca's hair had the rich, deep color of mahogany, while Eva's own appeared the flat, dull brown of a tree trunk. If that were not bad enough, Rebecca was also smarter. If she demonstrated none of the wiliness required for survival, it was only because Eva sheltered her from the experiences that called forth such shrewdness.

A girl as lovely as Rebecca deserved better than what she now knew. So far, however, other than those day trips to Birmingham, Eva had not been able to give Rebecca the chance for better. She had a plan, however, and this painting she now started was part of it.

Eva turned her attention back to her task and debated whether to remove the heavy plaster frame before proceeding. She would have to put it back on if she did, but she worried she might get paint on it if she did not. It dwarfed the oil canvas it decorated. She had never understood how owners of art could not see as clear as day when a frame detracted from the treasure it held.

Deciding to leave the frame on, she set her canvas panel on her easel next to the chair. Her canvas was larger than the painting by almost three inches in height, but she could not afford another. She would just have to dab in more up there, extending the trees and sky.

“Why did you choose that picture this time?” Rebecca asked, now standing by her shoulder. “I can’t imagine who will buy your copy. The subject is not grand at all.”

The painting showed three little boys playing near a fountain. Rosy-cheeked and bedecked in their best garments, they formed an informal group portrait most likely, but might have been done merely to indulge the artist’s whimsy.

“It is by Gainsborough, Rebecca. Someone will buy it for that reason alone since his style is still popular. And the boys will appeal to mothers and grandmothers in ways Greek gods will not.”

“Only if the gods are clothed. Paint them naked and those mothers will like them well enough.”

“Rebecca!”

“Please do not act shocked. If the sisters Neville have books of engravings of naked statues in their library, I think it is safe to say that women do not mind viewing such things.”

The sisters Neville were two spinsters of considerable income who lived in Langdon’s End. They saw in Rebecca a potential fellow bluestocking and made their library available to her—including, it appeared, engravings of ancient statues of naked men.

“I am sure the sisters have those books only because they are educational about the ancient Greeks.”

“Oh, yes, they are educational.” Rebecca smiled slyly. “I have learned a lot. Come with me sometime and I’ll show you the best ones.”

“If I come with you, it will be for better things than that.” Eva opened her paint box and began smearing paints she had mixed yesterday onto her palette. “Now go away. I must concentrate on this.”

Rebecca pouted again. “But I wanted to talk to you about something very important. I have been thinking about our lives here, and believe we should make a change. I have a plan . . .”

Eva stopped hearing what Rebecca said. The words became a sound in the background of her consciousness, much like a running brook will flow without one hearing every bubble. She barely noticed when Rebecca left.

Four hours later, while she cleaned her brushes and admired the day’s progress, a few of her sister’s words poked through the fog of her memory. They nibbled and jabbed until she paid them some mind and tried to reconstruct the content.

When she thought she had, she laughed. Surely Rebecca had not said that. Her sister would never propose in all seriousness that they sell the house, take the money, and go to London to become courtesans.

* * *

Merrywood Manor, five miles outside Cheltenham in the Gloucester hills, had not changed one bit during Percival's time as duke. He was leaving the renovation of its dated Palladian-derived design for his future duchess, he liked to say. Gareth assumed Percy was too miserly to ever renovate, or even take a wife, although the latter probably would have eventually occurred, a duke's duties being what they were. Percy's unwillingness to invest in the estate's properties had been obvious as Gareth rode in. A tenant cottage that had burned down at least five years ago still remained a pile of charred wood, and even Merrywood itself displayed evidence of needing some maintenance.

Gareth presented himself at the door of the manor house the way he always did, as a visitor. A bastard did not treat the family estate as home. The first time he came after his father died, Percy made the limitations clear by refusing to receive him. His father always had, and even the servants gave him entry during his father's life, even if his father was not at home.

He had watched his father's burial from the saddle of his horse on an overlooking hill. As the cream of the peerage carried the casket to the simple grave, a carriage rolled up and his mother stepped out. Head high, wearing an expression that dared Percy or anyone else to interfere, she had walked through the gathering of nobles to stand by the graveside while her lover was laid to rest. The duchess had been dead a good dozen years by then, but Gareth suspected his mother would have done it even if the duchess, too, had stood by the grave.

Today the door of Merrywood Manor bore a huge wreath draped in black bombazine. He wondered if Percy, with his last breaths, had ordered this gargantuan wreath along with the mausoleum.

He waited in the reception hall while his card was carried away, and followed the butler to the library after his reception had been given the nod. In the library he found Ives, the youngest of the legitimate brothers, and at thirty, two years older than Gareth. Officially named Ywain, which he hated, Ives was tall like all of the third duke's progeny. He now stood by a window that showed off his classical features. Its light caught the golden streaks in his dark brown hair. Upon hearing the door open he turned. A black armband wrapped the sleeve of his dark coat.

They waited for the butler to leave. Ives fought a battle with a grin that wanted to break out on his face. Devilish delight showed in his green eyes. He bit back the expression, coughed, and assumed a somber demeanor appropriate to the reunion. "Good of you to come, Gareth. I know Percy would be touched."

Gareth kept his expression blank with difficulty. "I read about it in Amsterdam and was on a packet by morning. So unexpected. So shocking."

"Yes, yes. As you can imagine, we are beside ourselves."

Oh, he could imagine. Around the time he turned fifteen, Gareth had realized Lance and Ives were his comrades in arms against Percy. They knew why he hated the duke's heir, but he still did not know what had happened in this family to set full-blooded brother against full-blooded brother.

"Amsterdam, you say?" Ives asked.

"Yes."

"I am glad to hear it. I assume your journey was both pleasurable and profitable."

Someone else who had wondered whether Percy had been done in by his bastard half brother. Gareth could hardly mind. He must have threatened to kill Percy half a dozen times in Ives's hearing.

"I am brokering a French count's collection. I found an industrialist here who has the money, and who desires an instant gallery to grace his newly built grand house. The paintings should arrive in a fortnight."

Ives gestured to a tray with a brandy decanter and raised his eyebrows quizzically. When Gareth nodded, Ives proceeded to pour. "Lance will want you to find such a buyer for some pictures from here. The ones Percy bought are not to his taste."

Gareth took the glass and sipped. "Are they to anyone's? I cannot sell what no one will buy."

"Perhaps you can locate a rich industrialist with bad eyesight. Or you can lie and claim they are the finest paintings dabbled in the last two decades."

"Only if we speak of works done by Spanish nuns. All those pastel fat cherubs and heaven-gazing saints with their palms of martyrdom— Do you think Percy was a secret dissenter?"

"That would require him to have had principles of some kind, would it not?"

Gareth almost choked. Ives sucked in his cheeks.

"Oh, hell," Ives sighed. "It won't do to be speaking ill of the dead. Not now. We would not want the servants to see us as anything but suitably mournful. Reports of raucous glee might be misunderstood. God forgive me, Gareth, he was my brother—but when I got the news in London, it was all I could do not to throw open the window and shoot a few pistol balls into the sky to celebrate."

"I'll wager you didn't only because the sound would have frightened your actress friend. How is she?"

"Expensive."

Gareth assumed that affair would end soon. "Why would reports of our mood be misunderstood? I assume no one believes he was well loved."

Ives turned very sober indeed. "It was possibly murder, Gareth. You surely heard. Even the papers allude to it."

"Were you hoping I was in England that day and eyes would turn to me?"

He got a sharp look for that. "Eyes had already turned. Inquiries are afoot in London to learn your whereabouts. So it is a damned good thing you were out of the country. I am truly relieved to have one fewer brother to protect with my lawyer's eloquence."

They stood there, glasses in hand, drinking the brandy.

"Where were you that day?" Gareth asked.

"In London. In court during the day and at a dinner party at night. I am of no interest to the magistrate."

They each took another swallow.

“And Lance?”

Ives let out a deep, long breath. “He was here. He was right in this damned house.”

“Indeed I was,” a voice said.

Gareth looked over his shoulder. Lance had just entered the library, appearing his formidable, unconventional self. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, dressed in arrogance and sharp intelligence as surely as black coats and boots, he flashed a smile that stupid men misunderstood as friendly. He had not shaved today, and the rough growth on his face emphasized rather than hid the long, thin scar on his right cheek.

He strode over, clapped a welcoming grasp on Gareth’s shoulder, then helped himself to some brandy. He faced them cup in hand.

“Pity I did not have the courage to do it. I think we are all in agreement, gentlemen, that Percy was a terrible excuse for a human being who sowed sorrow wherever he went. Let us toast him in death for the years of misery he will never now create.”

“You must stop saying things like that,” Ives snapped, slamming down his own glass. “A modicum of discretion is in order at least.”

“He is worried they will hang me,” Lance said to Gareth. His tone contained indifference to Ives’s concerns, or anyone’s opinion.

“I am not worried they will— Damn it, do you want people to wonder your whole life, should no culprit be found?”

“Hell if I care. As Duke of Aylesbury I expect I could survive a few cuts.”

“Listen to me. I do not expect you to weep over his grave, just try not to dance on it. Damnation, a man has died, and it is incumbent on his closest relatives to at least show some seriousness, lest eyebrows rise.”

“He is right,” Gareth said, working his face into an expression suitably glum. “A man has died, as he said.”

“Of course I am right,” Ives intoned.

Lance lowered his eyelids and smoothed away the smile. Feature by feature he created a mask. “More like this?”

“Yes, much better,” Ives said.

“Hellishly uncomfortable. It will take too much thought to keep it up.”

“Yet you must. Think of me inheriting everything after you swing. That should keep that grin in check.”

“Don’t they have to prove there was a murder before accusing someone of murder?” Gareth asked.

“The damned physician wrote up that he was possibly poisoned,” Lance said. “Hell, wouldn’t you think that if the man paying you is dead, you would be currying favor with the man who will pay you next, and not create drama by putting in writing there may have been a murder? That scribble was enough to stir the pot, and to support the accusation should other facts become known.”

“Which will not happen,” Ives said. “There are no other facts. There was no murder. Percy ate something that was tainted, or succumbed to a long-festering malady of the gut. That is our story, gentlemen. The magistrates are on a fool’s errand, and the coroner is making much ado about nothing.”

Still wearing his sobriety, Lance threw himself into a chair, lounging in the bored, languid pose that so clearly communicated both his arrogance and ennui with life. Gareth thought he appeared thinner, and somewhat haggard. He could not tell if current events caused that, or if it only reflected a long period of hedonistic excess prior to Percy’s death. They none of them had reputations as saints, but Lance also could not be bothered with discretion or restraint.

For a few minutes Lance’s vision turned inward, but then he focused attention on Gareth. “Perhaps you should give the eulogy, Mordred. You were the first to see all he could be.”

“Do not be perverse,” Ives scolded. “And I trust you are not going to pick up using that nickname for Gareth.”

“If you want, I will do it,” Gareth said. “As for how he addressed me, Ives, he is only reminding me of how eloquent my eulogy could be if I am given a free hand.”

Mordred had been Percy’s name for him. Resentful that their father had graced a bastard with the name of one of King Arthur’s knights, just like his legal children, Percy had decided a more appropriate one was in order. The conceit of those names had been the duchess’s idea. The duke’s using it on his bastard, too, had been an insult to her that just kept cutting.

“I am joking of course. You can be a pallbearer at the interment if you like. If you prefer to decline that is understandable.”

“I will watch it the way I watched my father’s funeral, from afar, if you do not mind.”

Lance threw back the rest of his brandy. “Hell, no, I don’t mind. I think I will ride. Waiting for something to happen is driving me mad. I would suggest we all visit a brothel, but Ives here has insisted we must pretend to be too sad for pleasure.”

He strode from the library. Ives watched him go, then turned and aimed for the garden doors. “Come walk with me, Gareth. I need to speak to you on another matter.”

* * *

“He laughs at the danger, but he is no fool. It is unlikely that he will ever be formally accused—he is now a duke, after all—but the shadow can follow him forever.” Ives spoke between puffs on a cigar. Ives smoked only when agitated. That he had resumed the habit said he was concerned about recent events and not assuming it would all turn out well.

“I expect his reputation does not help.” Lance had been a hell-raiser as a young man. Being the spare had made him more reckless than Ives, or even Gareth. A darkness lived in Lance, too, its origins unknown to Gareth. Not a criminal darkness, however. The notion Lance would poison anyone, let alone his own brother, could not be taken seriously.

“What truly does not help is that he cuckolded one of the magistrates,” Ives said. “The man knows it and will not let this chance pass, duke or no duke.”

Gareth had to laugh. “Remind me, should I be tempted, never to bed the wife of a man who can give me

legal trouble.”

“As if you would listen any more than he would. I must remain here with Lance and play the lawyer to his incorrigible client. I do not want him doing or saying something while in his cups that only makes it worse, and I want to keep informed of the thinking of those who are looking to make trouble.”

“That sounds wise.”

“Wise, but inconvenient. I was supposed to go north to investigate something, and now I cannot. I thought perhaps you might indulge me and take my place.”

Gareth hesitated. Ives often served as the Crown’s prosecutor in serious crimes. The something he needed to do up north might involve confronting dangerous men. While Gareth acquitted himself well enough in such situations, he was not inclined to seek them out, let alone for third parties unnamed.

Besides, he had his own mission now.

“I had thought to remain here for a few days at least, after the reinterment. I hope to speak with Lance.”

“That property is on your mind, of course. How could it not be. If you do this for me, I will plead your case for you, and convince him to drop the matter entirely. I do not believe it will take more than a few minutes and a few words, once I bring his attention to it.”

Ives had tried that with Percy, to no avail. Gareth thought Ives a brilliant lawyer, but property had a way of bringing out the worst in men.

“Furthermore,” Ives said. “This business I speak of is in the region of that lodge. I will get Lance to agree to allow you to use the house while you are there. You can begin settling in.”

Suddenly Ives’s proposal had appeal. “What is the matter you need me for?”

“A collection of art has gone missing.”

Not only appeal now, but real interest. “Whose collection?”

“It was not owned by one person. Rather, it comprised works owned by a number of people.”

“Which people?”

“No one important. Only half of the members of the House of Lords.”

* * *

“It was during the war,” Ives said. He and Gareth now sat on a bench beneath a tree. “Right around 1800. Everyone worried about invasion. You probably remember how it was then, even though we were boys. Napoleon already had the reputation for cultural rape. He picked out the best art and sent it back through the lines, to France. A number of very prominent lords took to worrying about the art in their manor homes. Their wives and daughters might suffer the worst, but, by George, their paintings would not end up in some French palace.”

“You say it like a joke, but a lot of art was looted by the French.”

“As it has been by every army down through time. Napoleon’s methodical looting distressed these lords, however. The Corsican brought experts with him who knew what they wanted. It was assumed he knew which families here owned what, and had a list ready. Any house gallery between the coast and London was considered vulnerable. So they hit on a solution to foil him.”

“Move the art,” Gareth guessed.

Ives nodded. “The best of the best got crated up and moved north, to the center of England, to await the end of the war. Only when that day came, and those who organized this went to retrieve it, it was not there.”

“Stolen?”

“It is not being called theft yet.”

“Where was it stored?”

“That is where it gets delicate. The repository was a property owned by the Duke of Devonshire.”

“*Delicate* puts a fine point to it. No wonder there has been no rumor or gossip about this. To say it was stolen insults a very powerful man.”

“There has been mild criticism about his vigilance. Nothing more. No one has dared to suggest he or the current duke in any way decided to divert any of the paintings to his own collection.”

“That family owns one of the best collections in the realm. They do not need anyone else’s.”

“Yet the paintings sent north are gone. The government has preached patience because the Regent had his hand in the original idea, but tempers are wearing thin. I was charged with learning what I could.”

Learning what he could might mean all kinds of things with Ives.

“Do you intend to question Devonshire?” Gareth asked.

“Do I look mad? He is coming for the interment, however.”

“I would not have thought Percy would have found any favor with Devonshire.”

“He didn’t. At all. The last duke once called him a miserable little demon. At best it is a matter of rank respecting itself. A duke dies and other dukes attend his funeral. At worst, the current Duke of Devonshire is coming to drive a stake into Percy’s heart.”

“Perhaps Lance will broach the topic for you. *I say there, Devvie, what do you think became of all that art your father agreed to store in your attics?* He would do it if you asked.”

“The danger is he will do it even if I don’t ask. Do not remind him of the matter. He knows of it, of course. All the lords do. Those who lost have not been silent among their peers. Since none of ours went missing, our brother is unlikely to think of it unless prodded.”

“How will you explain my little mission to him, then?”

“I was not intending to explain anything. We have never expected an accounting of your comings or goings.”

In other words, the new Duke of Aylesbury would not give a damn why Gareth was going north.

“If you arrange for me to have use of the lodge, we have ourselves a bargain.”

Ives stood. “I promise to see that legacy wholly resolved, once this other business is behind us. Until then, Lance will agree it is only right that you should use it as your own.”

It was all the assurance Gareth needed. Lance could be willful, even whimsical, but he was fair. A clean deed would be forthcoming sooner rather than later now. That derelict pile would be his, and he could start improving it. He followed Ives back to the house, making plans.

CHAPTER 4

“The big house has been let, I hear.” Rebecca mentioned the news while she sat on a burlap sack, watching Eva pluck weeds. The plantings behind their home had been laid out for flowers and shrubbery, but Eva had started tucking vegetables amid the blooms three years ago. It saved them a few pounds a year on food, all for little effort.

Growing vegetables had been the last of a long string of economies, and the one Eva least minded. Her father had sold off most of the land, and what was left brought in minimal rents. Her late brother’s five years of infirmity meant he had not been able to supplement their income with any kind of employment, not that Nigel would have taken up a trade even if he had had the health to do so. He had been a gentleman’s son and intended to die a gentleman himself, even if it meant his older sister had to sell the household furnishings to ensure they all had enough to eat.

“Who has taken it? I cannot imagine anyone wanting to live there,” Eva said.

“No one knows, but some boys saw a light through the lower windows two nights ago, and there are reports of a horse in the stable.”

“If not for the horse, I would say it was all nonsense and some of Langdon End’s young men had decided to get drunk there one night.”

“Whoever it is, I expect they will make themselves known in town soon. They are sure to be quality people. Even in its present state, the rent would be high for such a large house and property.”

“I expect so.” Eva hoped the rumors were wrong, and that at worst the house’s owner had sent a servant to stay a brief while. Perhaps some traveler had simply made use of an empty house and would soon be on his way. She had come to think of that house as abandoned and rather counted on it remaining so.

“I think you should call on them,” Rebecca said. “Perhaps they have a daughter who would be my friend.”

“I will do that if you promise not to complain that our house is not suitable for guests, since they are bound to then call on us in turn.”

Rebecca flushed. “Maybe if they have a daughter I will meet her in town.”

“Maybe you should allow her to know your circumstances when you meet her. There is no shame in our situation, and if this imaginary new friend is worthy of the name, she will not care.”

Rebecca stood abruptly, her brow knitted from her pique. "I do not mind our situation, but I do resent your acceptance of it. Instead of improving, it gets worse and now I cannot even have friends, because we do not have enough chairs since you sold them all."

"I sold them so you would not go hungry. And, of course, our situation is improving, even if you do not see the fruits of that yet. Our year of mourning is now over, and we can participate in society again. You can attend assemblies and meet other girls in town, and if you can restrain yourself from talking about philosophy in the first few conversations, you will find friends who will change everything."

"I am not speaking of social matters."

"Financial ones, then? My paintings are selling well enough so our circumstances are not so dire as they were, even with the bad harvest and unpaid rents. I think I am doing splendidly." She smiled and gave her sister a wink. "You are uncommonly out of sorts, Rebecca. It is not like you to complain with such vehemence."

Her attempt at lightening the conversation was to no avail. "What happens if no one wants your paintings someday?" Rebecca asked.

"I will find another way to improve our lot, should that happen. You are not to worry."

"I do worry. You may see improvement, but I see more of the same for years on end. I say we make big changes, not your little ones. Let us make the best of our breeding and youth and blaze another trail while we still can."

Eva looked up at her sister. Rebecca's face flushed and her posture stiffened, but she met Eva's gaze boldly.

"You refer to your improper proposal from the other day, I fear." She should have paid more attention at the time, and pulled that particular weed at once. "You cannot be serious, Rebecca."

"Why not? The sisters Neville say such a life can bring a woman security and even riches."

Eva laughed and stood. "Darling, you do not even comprehend what such a life entails. I wonder if the sisters Neville really do either. I cannot imagine why they would speak of such things to you."

"I asked them, and they answered frankly. Not everyone thinks women should remain ignorant."

"You are not a woman. You are a child."

"Oh, tosh! Look at me, Eva. Really look at me. Do not let the memories obscure what you see." Tears sparkled in Rebecca's eyes. Her defiant expression turned into one of pitiable unhappiness. "I am no child. I will be nineteen soon. Not one man has proposed. Not one. I have not even had a tragic love, like you did. And look at yourself. You used to have dreams of being an artist, but you have only done copies for years now. And I cannot remember the last time I saw you sketch."

Turning on her heel, Rebecca ran to the house.

Eva gazed over the garden she had known all her life. A memory came to her of playing with a much younger Rebecca amid the shrubbery. Then others flowed, of comforting her little sister when their father passed away.

She dropped to her knees and continued pulling weeds. As her gloved hands yanked the tiny intruders out,

her heart accommodated the words with which Rebecca had slapped her, hard.

Her sister did not really want to become a fallen woman. Rebecca just wanted to know she would have some kind of life besides this one. The lack of suitors would weigh on any young woman Rebecca's age, and cause a restlessness that made her vulnerable.

Her thoughts turned to Charles, the "tragic love" Rebecca had thrown in her face. Not really tragic. Rebecca had been too dramatic. After all, Charles had not died. He had not forsaken her. He had merely gone away as he had planned, only without her because she could not—no, *would* not—marry him and go too. To do so would mean leaving her brother alone and sick, weak from that pistol wound that forever after affected his health.

That duty had cost her dearly. Marriage, her youth, her art—

She avoided thinking about all of it, because when she did her heart turned angry and frightened.

She almost never thought about Charles anymore. She rarely grew wistful with thoughts of what might have been. She hated that she did now.

She shut the memories away and thought about her plans for the future, plans she did not confide to Rebecca lest they not come to pass. With her sister's unhappiness, it might be time to embark on that path sooner than intended.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Lauren Cook:

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